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Role and functioning of the Statistical Commission

Report of the ad hoc group established by the Statistical Commission

Note by the Secretary-General

1. The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the Working Group the report of the ad hoc group established to explore new approaches to the structure and operation of the Statistical Commission, as well as to the relationship between the regional commissions and the Statistical Commission and other international organizations,[1] which is contained in the annex.

2. The Coordinator of the group circulated drafts of its report to the group members and to the Chairman of the Statistical Commission in July and October 1997, as requested by the Commission.[2] At the request of the Chairman, the report of the ad hoc group, which has been revised in the light of members' comments and a meeting of some members of the group held in New York on 4 November 1997, is accordingly submitted to the Working Group for its consideration.

Notes

1 See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1997, Supplement No. 4* (E/1997/24), para. 81 (b).

2 Ibid., para. 82.

* E/CN.3/AC.1/1998/1.1

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Annex

Begeer and beyond: some additional steps towards more effective international statistical cooperation

Report of the ad hoc group established by the Statistical Commission to explore new approaches to its structure and operation[a]

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I. Recommendations

1. The ad hoc group recommends the following:

(a) Present an integrated programme of statistical (methodological) development work for discussion in the Statistical Commission, and more precisely define the role of the various actors (United Nations, non-United Nations organizations, city groups, inter-secretariat groups and others) in the implementation of such a programme, in particular in terms of the outputs expected from them, as well as the time-frames planned for those outputs;

(b) For the sake of enhancing continuity, consider the Statistical Commission's Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination, de facto, as a continuation of the Statistical Commission itself in the years that the Commission does not meet. In addition, encourage broad participation of observers in the work of both the Statistical Commission itself and its Working Group;

(c) Give the current Bureau of the Commission (if necessary complemented by any others whose participation is deemed useful by the Chairman) more of a steering role by having it meet at the end of the biennial sessions of the Commission in order to "translate" the decisions of the Commission into a (duly revised) list of concrete actions to be undertaken, specifying who would take the actions and drafting a time schedule for their completion;

(d) Promote inclusiveness of countries in the Commission's work, create an "international cyber platform" on the Internet to enable a more active participation of countries in all the major international statistical discussions (including informal discussions, such as in the city groups), while avoiding undue travel cost;

(e) Further improve the focus of documentation for meetings of the Commission by systematically using a standard format for all programme elements, which should in particular include specification of exactly what is expected of the Commission;

(f) Consider modalities for enhancing the involvement of important international users, including users from the private sector, in designing statistical programmes and priority setting for statistical (methodological) development at the international level.

II. Introduction

2. At its twenty-ninth session (New York, 11-14 February 1997), the Statistical Commission established an ad hoc group to generate ideas to further enhance international statistical cooperation, building on the report of the Review Group on strengthening international statistical cooperation (E/CN.3/AC.1/1992/representative.2) (also known as the "Begeer report") and a report on the implementation of the Review Group proposals (E/CN.3/1997/23) (also known as the "McLennan report").

3. In avoiding duplication, the ad hoc group recognized that the Begeer report, among other things, presented a comprehensive and detailed analysis of the international statistical system and its functioning which is still largely valid, and the report also contained a large number of specific recommendations on how the functioning of the system could be improved. The United Nations Secretariat added some useful explanations to the Begeer report in document E/CN.3/AC.1/1992/representative.3. Finally, the McLennan report specifically focused on the follow-up to the recommendations of the Begeer report.

4. The ad hoc group wishes to reiterate most of the recommendations contained in the Begeer report, and in agreement with the McLennan report, wishes to emphasize the importance of their systematic implementation. However, the ad hoc group also feels that it is important to take into account recent developments, which have affected the demands made on the international statistical system but have also created new opportunities for exchange of opinions and experience. Accordingly, the ad hoc group wishes to propose a number of measures to further improve the functioning of the Statistical Commission in its capacity as the focal point of international statistical development.

5. The role of the Commission and its Working Group is seen as:

(a) Promoting the development and adoption of world statistical standards;

(b) Deciding on methodological programme orientations and priorities at the global level;

(c) Encouraging the different actors of the international statistical system to do their agreed part of the work;

(d) Monitoring progress on the implementation of agreed world statistical standards.

6. The present report deals with what were believed to be the most important aspects of international statistical (methodological) development. It focuses on three issues:

(a) Objectives and priorities for international statistical cooperation, in other words, how to establish an international agenda for statistical (methodological) development;

(b) The actors on the international statistical stage: their actual and potential contributions, and how best to coordinate the actors and the way they interact;

(c) Achieving more effective and efficient cooperation by promoting a more active involvement of countries and regions in the development of the global statistical system.

III. Objectives and priorities

7. In general terms, the ultimate objective of the international statistical system is the compilation and dissemination of high quality (i.e., relevant, timely, reliable, impartial, comparable, well documented and compiled in a cost-effective manner) statistical information at the international level. However, since international statistics are largely constructed from national building blocks, it is clear that the promotion of good statistics at the national level is a prerequisite to achieving the ultimate objective and is therefore also a major concern. As noted in the Begeer report, countries are the foundation of the entire system.

8. Concerning the quality aspect of *relevance*, it is obviously essential that the policy needs of the users and potential users of statistical products be detected as clearly as possible, for which there are several mechanisms, mostly at the national level. The question may arise, however, whether the needs of some international users, such as multinational companies, consulting firms and development banks, are always properly taken into account. The ad hoc group thinks that the Statistical Commission should consider in what manner and at what levels such users could be more involved in setting the agenda for statistical development work. In addition, more systematic monitoring of the actual use of international statistical products is recommended to assess user satisfaction.

9. The main focus of the present report, however, is on how to achieve an internationally agreed, coordinated statistical programme for methodological development, including an agenda of priorities and an implementation plan once standards have been adopted.

IV. Presentation of work programmes

10. The ad hoc group recommends that in the future presentation of work programmes to the Statistical Commission, for each methodological programme item systematic attention be given to the three issues mentioned above (see para. 6).

11. The documentation for each item should begin by noting what was decided about the item at previous Commission session(s), and should end with a clear statement of exactly what decision is expected of the Commission at the current session. Subsequent paragraphs should specify:

(a) Substantive priorities in this area of work;

(b) Objectives in the short and medium term, including time-frames;

(c) Expected outputs of the work that is to be done (standards, manuals);

(d) Instruments envisaged to produce those outputs (formal and informal meetings, data collection, user consultations, the commissioning of experts);

(e) Means of promoting successful implementation of agreed priorities and standards;

(f) Bodies/individuals responsible for carrying the work forward (e.g., international organizations, city groups).

12. An example of such a presentation is given in appendix I.

V. Roles of the actors

13. In recent years, much progress has been made in better coordinating the work in terms of "who does what", avoiding, among other things, duplication of meetings; the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities and the various intersecretariat groups have been instrumental in that progress. However, the ad hoc group feels that further steps may need to be taken at this stage. Therefore, it recommends that for each substantive area of work, the role of the various actors be more clearly defined. In particular, it would be helpful if for each major programme item a lead organization be designated, to be responsible for the compilation of the documentation on that item and also to present it at Commission sessions. In addition, the following other roles could be distinguished:

(a) One or more supporting organizations, which could take care of specific parts or aspects of the work in question;

(b) Specific organizations, meaning organizations (such as the Statistical Office of European Communities (Eurostat) or the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)) which, while respecting internationally agreed priorities and standards in principle, may need to do additional work in the same area or to adapt agreed standards for their own policy purposes, albeit in such a way that perfect linkage to world standards is ensured. This concerns what was referred to in the Begeer report as "flexible standardization" (or flexible coordination). Obviously, a "specific organization" could also act as "lead organization" or "supporting organization";

(c) Advisers or sub-contractors, in particular city groups and task forces, which carry out an agreed piece of work. A good example of that role is the drafting for the Statistical Commission by the Voorburg Group on Service Statistics of the services part of the Provisional Central Product Classification;[b]

(d) The coordinating role: ensuring that the pieces of the puzzle come together at the required moment. Obviously, the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities and intersecretariat groups must be the key players in that role;

(e) Finally, the role of "rapporteur" or perhaps better, "programme reviewer" is proposed here. That role would involve reporting to the Commission on the current situation regarding a specific programme element, identifying gaps and overlaps, progress (or lack of it), possible change of focus and other aspects. The idea would be to ask a specific *country* to act in that capacity.

VI. Strengthening the role of the Statistical Commission

14. The present section of the report focuses mainly on possible mechanisms for strengthening the functioning of the Statistical Commission and the involvement of member States in its work. Some observations and recommendations are set out below.

15. The meetings of the Commission have recently become shorter and more efficient but also more productive. Several factors have contributed to that achievement: important and well-documented agenda items, active participation by a good number of members and observers, a more restrained role on the part of the international secretariats, shorter introductory statements by the United Nations Statistics Division and brief decision-oriented minutes, as recommended in the Begeer report. Improving the documentation for the Commission, as proposed in paragraph 11 above, could further enhance the effectiveness of its meetings.

16. Continuity of the Commission remains a point of concern. In order to improve continuity, the Begeer report proposed several mechanisms, including annual four-day meetings of the Commission (instead of the previous eight days every other year). However, the Economic and Social Council has since made it clear that it wishes to reduce both the length and the frequency of meetings of this type. Therefore, continuity must be achieved in different ways. The Begeer report recommendation to re-elect the same persons a number of times to the Bureau, although helpful, seems not to work well in practice because of the unpredictability of elections of countries to the Commission and unforeseen personal changes of position. Therefore, a pragmatic arrangement is proposed in which continuity, effective leadership and a more active and geographically balanced participation form, so to say, a "package deal", the reasoning for which is advanced below.

17. The Commission's Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination, which meets in the years that the Commission does not meet, has become so large that it resembles the Commission rather closely in terms of its participants. This is partly due to the expansion in the number of observers who attend the meetings, a phenomenon that also applies to the Commission itself. In practical terms, it does not make much difference whether a country participates as a formal member or as an observer. Therefore, it is proposed that the Working Group be considered de facto, though not of course *de jure*, as the continuation of the Commission itself in the years between Commission sessions.

18. However, partly due to its size, the Working Group cannot fulfil the functions of the Commission and at the same time play the role of steering group which was envisaged for it in the Begeer report. It is therefore proposed that the Bureau of the Commission assume that steering function. The Bureau would consist of the five officers of the Commission, plus the envisaged incoming Chair of the Commission (if not already an officer), with the Director of the United Nations Statistics Division, in his capacity as United Nations chief statistician, to act as Secretary. In addition, it would be the prerogative of the Chairman to invite to the Bureau meetings any others whose presence might be required or useful for effective decision-making.

19. The functions of the Bureau would basically be (a) to translate Commission decisions into (duly revised) action plans, including who does what and when and how they should do it, and (b) to monitor progress. To do so it would have to meet after Commission sessions and before Working Group sessions. In addition, informal contacts among Bureau members in-between formal meetings might be required. The Bureau would emphatically not be an additional decision-making body but merely the "strong arm" of the Commission, ensuring that its decisions were implemented in the best possible way.

VII. The role of other important forums

A. ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities

20. The ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities is a committee of the secretariats of the organizations and bodies of the United Nations system, which has been expanded to include the secretariats of non-United Nations organizations active in international statistical work. It is therefore not an intergovernmental institution like the Statistical Commission. However, its role as one of the important cornerstones of international statistical coordination can hardly be overemphasized. Obviously, that importance applies even more to the United Nations Statistics Division and its Director within the Subcommittee. In the years since the Begeer report, the Subcommittee has improved greatly in its effectiveness and has provided extremely useful inputs to the Commission. The McLennan report mentions that the ACC Subcommittee now seems to be more focused on its role as a key coordinating body and is performing effectively (see E/CN.3/1997/23, para. 7). It may therefore be concluded that no new actions are to be recommended for the Subcommittee for the time being.

B. Regional commissions and Conference of European Statisticians

21. The functions of the regional commissions and the Conference of European Statisticians are primarily seen as:

(a) Monitoring and stimulating the implementation of international standards in the countries of their region;

(b) Guiding the countries of their region in the implementation process, such as by advising on priorities or on the proper choice between alternative methods, as well as by organizing various forms of technical cooperation;

(c) Contributing to the development of international statistical standards.

22. As to the functioning of the statistical bodies of the regional commissions, the ad hoc group wishes to make the following comments:

(a) It reiterates the point made in the Begeer and McLennan reports that the statistical divisions of the regional commissions should preferably be strengthened. Equally, it emphasizes the importance of more active regional meetings of chief statisticians. Considering that countries are the core of the international statistical system, such regional meetings are a key instrument for actively involving all countries in international developments. An important difference between the Statistical Commission and such regional bodies is that whereas the Commission is formally restricted to 24 members, the regional bodies are intended for all member States in a given region (and may indeed be attended by any United Nations member State);

(b) Much of what has been noted above about the functioning of the Statistical Commission also applies to the regional statistical bodies: the recommendations for an integrated work programme and the need to establish procedures that ensure member countries' involvement with strong continuity, combined with mechanisms to ensure effective guidance (in other words, the creation of a steering group), are equally applicable at the regional level.

C. Statistical divisions of United Nations bodies, including the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank

23. Their role is perceived to be:

(a) To contribute to the development of statistical standards for their specific area of responsibility (as lead or supporting organizations), within the framework of priorities set at the world level);

(b) To stimulate the implementation of those standards by various means, including technical cooperation;

(c) To work together with regional organizations in order to avoid duplication of work.

24. The ad hoc group has no specific comments to make on the role of these agencies, except that the joint meetings of the Conference of European Statisticians and several

United Nations agencies are a good example of how duplication of effort may be avoided.

D. Key players outside the United Nations system

25. Their role is:

(a) To contribute to the development of international statistical standards (as lead or supporting organizations), of course primarily from the point of view of their own policy needs, but preferably also within the framework of internationally agreed priorities;

(b) To ensure coordination with world standards to the maximum extent possible;

(c) To monitor the implementation of international standards in their member countries;

(d) To contribute to technical cooperation in the internationally agreed subject matter areas and regions.

E. City groups

26. Their role is:

(a) To actively contribute to the development of international standards in their respective areas of work, within the framework set by the above-mentioned integrated international work programme;

(b) To exchange best practices in their area of work;

(c) To produce specific outputs (advice, classifications, manuals) requested by the Statistical Commission.

27. To more closely integrate the work of city groups into the international statistical system, it is recommended that the Commission register the existence and medium-term objectives of city groups, request specific research from them (including reporting back to the Commission) and agree with city groups on how the result of their work is to be disseminated. When appropriate, time horizons for the existence of city groups should be suggested in order to prevent "automatic continuation", with possible diminishing effectiveness.

28. The current officially recognized city groups are:

(a) Voorburg group; service statistics (secretariat, Statistics Canada);

(b) Ottawa group: prices, deflators (secretariat, Statistics Canada);

(c) London group: environmental accounting (secretariat, Eurostat);

(d) Paris group: labour and compensation (secretariat, Institut National de la statistique et des études économiques);

(e) Delhi group: informal sector (secretariat, Department of Statistics, Government of India);

(f) Round table: business registers (variable secretariat; although not named after a city, this group, for all practical purposes, fulfils the same functions as the city groups).

F. Subregional statistical groupings

29. Recently, a number of subregional statistical organizations have been established which foster the development, production and dissemination of statistics in their areas (Afristat being one example). It is recommended that ways be sought to involve such bodies in the work of the Commission by inviting them to participate in its work.

G. Task forces

30. The task forces were not specifically recommended in the Begeer report, but were set up (with the exception of the task forces on international trade statistics and national accounts, which already existed) during discussion by the Working Group at its fifteenth session (New York, 29 June-1 July 1992) (see E/CN.3/1993/21, annex II, para. 51) and at the twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission, in 1993.[c] They were later "adopted" by the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities because they were almost entirely made up of international secretariat participants. It is generally agreed that the results of the newer task forces have been uneven at best. As noted in the McLennan report, the task forces, with the notable exception of the Task Force on International Trade Statistics, have not been very active (see E/CN.3/1997/23, para. 7). The ad hoc group proposes that the Commission not make any changes in the current set-up of task forces but decides on the issue on an ad hoc basis, based on the merit of the results achieved by the existing task forces. Rather than establishing (new) task forces, the Commission may prefer to establish small groups consisting of representatives of member States only, as the need arises, or alternatively, may wish to set up small

unofficial intersecretariat groups. Many of such groups work well, such as in the area of agricultural statistics, involving the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), OECD and Eurostat.

VIII. The Internet as an instrument to promote the inclusion of countries in methodological work

31. The present section of the report specifically focuses on the establishment of an electronic Internet information and discussion forum on international statistical cooperation as a mechanism to involve more countries and to avoid undue travel and meeting costs.

32. The recommendations contained elsewhere in the present report are meant to promote an active and effective participation of countries from all United Nations regions in meetings at the global and regional levels. But although that may in itself be important, those meetings are only a small part of what is happening on the international statistical stage. Many countries would still be excluded from activities which take place before, in-between and after such meetings. Budget constraints, restricted staff potential and the burden of long travel are among the main factors preventing many countries from participating in the discussions of city groups, expert meetings etc. They may even have difficulty finding out what meetings are planned, what is about to be discussed and how to obtain documentation.

33. Therefore, it is proposed to make better use of modern technology and to create the World Electronic Statistics Platform (WESP) on the Internet. Most statistical offices of the world seem to have access to the Internet, or can achieve access in the short term. The proposed WESP site would be designed as a platform for all international statistical actors and for all countries (national statistical offices and other interested parties) and individual statisticians. It would contain segments for each of the international actors, in which notification of meetings would be given, as well as the agenda, lists of the titles of papers to be discussed, (summary) reports of meetings and electronic access to papers, with the possibility of downloading them. It would also allow countries to give their view on the issues to be discussed (and upload that view), as well as to read the views of other interested parties. A note on the structure of the proposed WESP site is contained in appendix II.

Notes

[a] Inputs to the present report were supplied by: Ms. W. Moore (Germany), Ms. C. Carson (IMF), Ms. K. Wallman (United States), Mr. C. Jarque (Mexico), Mr. T. Holt and Mr. A. Pritchard (United Kingdom), Mr. J. Ryten (Canada), Mr. S. Schwartzman (Brazil), Mr. Y. Franchet (Eurostat), Mr. T. Griffin (ECE Statistical Division), Mr. H. Brüngger (Switzerland), Mr. W. Begeer (Netherlands), Mr. W. McLennan (Australia) and Mr. H. Habermann (United Nations Statistical Division). Mr. W. DeVries (Netherlands) coordinated the work of the group and drafted the present report.

[b] Statistical Papers, Series M, No. 77 (United Nations publications, Sales No. E.91.XVII.7).

[c] *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1993, Supplement No. 6* (E/1993/26), para. 27.

Appendix I

Example of the proposed new style of integrated work programme module

Programme element

National accounts.

Programme item

Development of deflators for the services sector.

Commission's last decision (19--)

To invite the Bureau to draft an action plan for methodological development in this area.

Problem outline

In all countries, a big gap exists between the requirements for high-quality constant price estimation in the services sector and the current state of the art in this field. Differences in deflation methods used by countries make international comparisons of real gross domestic product (GDP) change impossible. There has already been negative publicity on the understatement of service production volumes. It has become increasingly difficult to measure the volume of services production because technical change and economic dynamics have speeded up and because the relative importance of services has grown substantially. Even the definition of the quantity or volume of many services is quite complicated.

Priority objective

To produce a manual on best practices (preferred methods and recommended alternatives) for service sector deflation procedures.

Envisaged time-frame

A draft manual should be available for discussion by the Statistical Commission at its session in 2001.

Instruments to achieve the objective

1. Invite the Ottawa and Voorburg groups to put the issue on the agendas of their next meetings (1998) and to prepare a brief report.

2. Eurostat is treating the subject in the framework of a draft European Union regulation on measuring volume changes of GDP for the Stability Pact; ask Eurostat to make available its report on the issue (1998).

3. Organize a joint Eurostat-OECD meeting on the outcomes of the Eurostat exercise and the reports of the Ottawa and Voorburg groups (1999).

4. Recruit a consultant to prepare the first draft of a manual.

5. Discuss the draft manual in the Statistical Commission Working Group meeting in 2000 and in the regional commissions.

6. Discuss the draft manual in the Statistical Commission in 2001.

7. Publish the manual by the United Nations in 2001.

Technical cooperation questions

1. Make the manual available to all United Nations Member countries.

2. Organize implementation assistance, if required.

Lead organization

Eurostat.

Support

OECD.

Advice

Ottawa and Voorburg groups.

Coordination

Eurostat-OECD-Intersecretariat Working Group on National Accounts.

Rapporteur

France.

The Commission may wish to

1. Give its views on the proposed objectives.

2. Endorse the action plan.

Appendix II

Note on the structure of the proposed World Electronic Statistics Platform site

1. First of all, it is essential that the proposed World Electronic Statistics Platform (WESP) site be made accessible to as many users as possible. This implies that the pages should be kept simple and accessible for each browser, on the basis of "downward compatibility"; it should support Internet Explorer 2.0 and Netscape 2.0. On the basis of hit-rates, support for older browsers could eventually be stopped. It is assumed that — for practical reasons — most pages within the proposed WESP structure would be in English only.

2. The core and starting point of the WESP site could be a home page on a United Nations Statistics Division server, containing some practical information but mainly providing links to other statistical sites (of United Nations agencies, other international organizations, the city groups, the International Statistical Institute and its sections, national statistical agencies and other bodies). For users, the advantage would be that the site would provide a one-stop information source. To make users feel more comfortable, links to other sites should preferably lead to pages that have a WESP look and feel (uniform background, harmonized button positions etc.). In the case of existing sites, this would mean that a WESP corner would have to be created.

3. It is assumed that the information on each of the pages within the WESP structure would have to be moderated by a Web master. There would be no possibilities for users to directly and interactively change the content of any one page. Uploading of information, such as comments on documents, would take place via the Web master, usually by e-mail.

4. Basically, there are two technologies available: Listserver and News. Listserver is based on the "push" model: anyone who is listed as a client receives all information that is new on the server (old information is not visible, nor can it be retrieved automatically). News is based on the "pull" model: the client has to go to the required home page, and can retrieve and download anything he/she needs, including old material. News seems to be preferable to Listserver.

5. The use of both the Internet and e-mail (either as Listserver or as News) requires the availability of two client applications, one for surfing on the Internet (the browser) and one for e-mail. The latest version of Microsoft Exchange supports all facilities through the Internet browser.

6. Obviously, creating such a facility and keeping it up to date is a complex process, in particular from an organizational point of view. Therefore, it requires some human resources. In addition, the question of financing has to be addressed. If the United Nations cannot provide the resources to manage the site, a solution could be for the site — in a technical sense — to be managed by a commercial service company, whose standard procedure could be to finance it through advertising (software companies etc.).